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## A HISTORICAL SURVEY

A literary approach to the study of the Bible is both a new and an old phenomenon. In the past two decades unprecedented attention has been directed to the literary qualities of the text. In the glare of the present explosion of interest, however, we must not lose sight of the long prehistory of literary approaches. The present chapter surveys the history of the interrelationship of biblical and literary studies. The early history is lightly treated, not to denigrate its importance, but by choice our focus is the different contemporary manifestations of the literary approach. It is appropriate to emphasize the recent past, given the current fascination of the biblical scholar for the literary approach.

The chapter is not exhaustive but serves as a beginning guide to the use of literary concepts and tools in the field of biblical studies. The concentration in the historical survey will clearly be on the second half of the twentieth century. Pre-twentieth-century schools and figures chosen for comment are cited as high points or representatives.

### PRECURSORS TO THE LITERARY APPROACH

#### Patristic Interpretation

Many of the early church fathers were educated in classical rhetoric and poetics. As a result, they frequently applied the

principles of literature that they learned in school to the study of the Scriptures. They often compared biblical stories and poems with ones familiar to them in classical literature. The result was, from a modern perspective, a distortion of understanding and evaluation of the biblical texts. Jerome, for example, scanned Hebrew poems and described their poetic form in labels developed for Greek and Latin poetry.<sup>1</sup> Kugel quotes Jerome as saying:

What is more musical than the Psalter? which, in the manner of our Flaccus or of the Greek Pindar, now flows in iambs, now rings with Alcaics, swells to a Sapphic measure or moves along with a half-foot? What is fairer than the hymns of Deuteronomy or Isaiah? What is more solemn than Solomon, what more polished than Job? All of which books, as Josephus and Origen write, flow in the original in hexameter and pentameter verses.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine too compared biblical stories with classical stories and found the former rough and clumsy in their form when compared with the latter. In his *Confessions* (Book 3:5) we find the following telling comment:

So I made up my mind to examine the holy Scriptures and see what kind of books they were. I discovered something that was at once beyond the understanding of the proud and hidden from the eyes of children. Its gait was humble, but the heights it reached were sublime. . . . When I first looked into the Scriptures . . . they seemed quite unworthy of comparison with the stately prose of Cicero.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine thought that the Bible had a low literary quality, which for him represented a test of faith and humility. The intellectual must be willing to accept the idea that the Bible is inferior literature and must still believe the message. Other fathers of the church attempted to prove that the Bible was actually superior to pagan literature in its form as well as in its content.

<sup>1</sup>J. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 149-56.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

Of course, the flaw inherent in the Fathers' literary approach to the Bible is that they judged the text by standards developed for the analysis of a foreign literature. The imposition of alien values on the biblical text is a pitfall that continues to the present day (see chapter 2). The positive aspect of the Fathers' approach is that they recognized the literary qualities of the biblical stories, an awareness that gradually diminished as the content of the Scriptures was abstracted into various theological systems.

### Robert Lowth and the Study of Hebrew Poetry

Poetry is so obviously literary, in the sense of artful and conventional, that it was subjected to literary analysis long before prose. Robert Lowth, who was a professor of English at Oxford in the late eighteenth century, wrote a landmark analysis of the workings of Hebrew poetry, particularly parallelism.<sup>4</sup> By categorizing parallelism, discussing meter, and describing other poetic devices, Lowth approached part of the Bible as a literary text. He was, in essence, describing the conventions that shaped the writing of the Psalms, Isaiah, and other poetic texts. Lowth's results, though eventually receiving considerable modification, aided in the correct reading of the poetry of the Old Testament.

Work on understanding the conventions and devices of Hebrew poetry has continued unabated ever since. Primarily, scholars have further refined Lowth's categories of parallelism and have suggested various schemes for describing meter. Interesting work has also been done in the area of grammatical parallelism and in the delineation of other secondary devices (see chapter 6).

### Hermann Gunkel

In reading the most recent research on the literary method, one would be surprised to find Hermann Gunkel's name in a list

<sup>4</sup>R. Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (London: T. Tegg & Son, 1835; orig. 1753); cf. A. Baker, "Parallelism: England's Contribution to Biblical Studies," *CBQ* 35 (1973): 429-40.

of representative early developers of the literary approach. Indeed, in the eyes of some, Gunkel is the archenemy of a literary approach.<sup>5</sup> With his interest in discovering the individual forms and their setting in life, the emphasis was on individual texts outside of their canonical context and on a sociological rather than a literary explanation of their origins.

A definite gulf exists between Gunkel and contemporary aesthetic critics, but we should still recognize that Gunkel developed his understanding of form criticism in an interdisciplinary context. His use of the concepts of genre (*Gattung*), form (*Form*), and setting in life (*Sitz im Leben*) are heavily informed by literary and sociological theories of his day.<sup>6</sup> Indeed one of the difficulties with biblical form criticism as traditionally practiced is not that it is aliterary in its understanding of genre but that it adopts a neoclassical concept of genre that was obsolete even in Gunkel's day.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Gunkel advanced a literary approach to the study of Scripture by focusing attention on the all-important issue of identifying the genre of a text in the process of interpretation.

### James Muilenburg and Rhetorical Criticism

James Muilenburg delivered his presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1968, an event that has since become a touchstone for holistic and literary approaches to the study of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> The title, "Form Criticism and Beyond," is instructive because, while appreciating the strengths of form criticism, he felt it was time to move beyond the impasse that had resulted from concentrating on individual pericopes within

<sup>5</sup>For instance, Weiss, *The Bible from Within*.

<sup>6</sup>G. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 4-5; and M. J. Buss, "The Study of Forms," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. J. H. Mayer (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), p. 50.

<sup>7</sup>Neo-classical genre theory is a nineteenth-century phenomenon that held a rigid view of genres as pure and hierarchical; see G. N. G. Orsini, "Genres," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 308.

<sup>8</sup>J. Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *JBL* 88 (1969): 1-18.

texts. He was concerned as well with the emphasis that form criticism placed on the "typical and representative" to the exclusion of "individual, personal, and unique features." On the positive side, he recognized that the Old Testament had a high literary quality and promoted the study of style. His work has since stimulated many other studies connected with the style of Hebrew poetry and prose.

The preceding survey is very schematic. It completely ignores some major figures of the past, particularly the medieval period and also of this century (Norden, König, and Alonso-Schökel, for instance). Nonetheless, it is now clear that the modern literary approach has a long history in the field of biblical interpretation, even if it has never before reached the current level of activity.

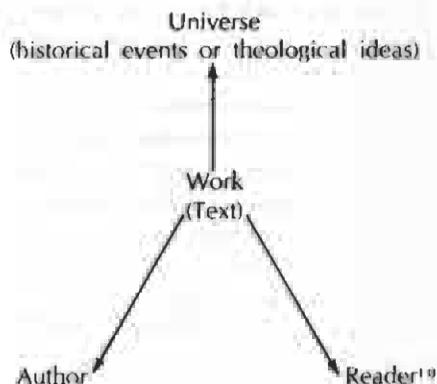
As we now turn to the modern period of literary study of the Bible, there are many ways in which we could proceed. One possible approach is chronological and charts the different dominant schools of thought in secular literary study and then gives examples concerning how each school of thought has exerted an influence on biblical studies. To proceed in such a way, one would begin with New Criticism, then consider structuralism and semiotics, and finally conclude with deconstruction. Other influential minority positions could then be discussed, particularly reader-response, archetypal, Marxist, and feminist literary criticism.

Biblical studies, however, does not follow the chronological pattern of secular theory. Some researchers in Bible write in a New Critical mode long after New Criticism has passed away as a major school in literary theory. Others adopt more traditional modes of literary criticism, even in this age of deconstruction. In reality, of course, this diversity reflects the situation in literary theory. Deconstruction may be the avant-garde movement today, but many in literary theory either blithely or studiously avoid it in order to continue in traditional, perhaps even pre-New Critical, modes of interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Some believe, however, that deconstruction is already somewhat passé, evidence for which they see in an article by C. Campbell, "The Tyranny of the Yale Critics," *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 9, 1986.

Instead of a diachronic survey of literary theory, then, I employ a synchronic analysis.

Each school of thought concentrates attention on one element of what might be called the act of literary communication. A literary text may be seen as a message of one sort or another addressed by an author to a reader. The communication itself takes place in a certain social and temporal context, which may be called the universe. These relations may be diagrammed as follows:



Theorists of the traditional school believe that we should interpret the meaning of a piece of literature by concentrating on the author. Others focus on the text, and still others focus on the reader. I discuss the various schools of literary theory under their respective focuses—author-centered, text-centered, and reader-centered. The main principles of each school of literary study will be examined, followed by specific examples of the influence each has exercised on biblical studies.

<sup>10</sup>M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 3–29; and J. Barton, "Classifying Biblical Criticism," *JSTOT* 29 (1984): 19–35.

## AUTHOR-CENTERED THEORIES

### Literary Studies

Modern literary criticism has rejected the author as the major element in the interpretive process. Since the advent of New Criticism in the 1940s until the present, theorists have proclaimed the death of the author, granting authors no privileged insight into their own work. This trend, of course, is a complete reversal of the traditional approach to interpretation as it was known in the first half of the century.

### TRADITIONAL CRITICISM

Traditional criticism before 1940 took great interest in the author. The key to interpretation was thought to lie in a knowledge of the activities and thought life of the author as he or she was writing a poem or narrative. The interpreter desired to discover the author's intentional meaning. Sandra Bermann describes the attitude of traditional criticism in the following illustrative way: "If we read histories, biographies, and Keats' own letters with enough scholarly patience and skill, we could be confident of 'getting the poem right,' 'understanding it,' 'interpreting its truth.'"<sup>11</sup> It is pivotal to know, for example, that Keats wrote his sonnet "Bright Star," with its themes of love and death, as he was caring for his brother Tom, who was dying of tuberculosis (and infecting John), and also that he was sobered by the reality of death in his passion for Fanny. This background knowledge, it was thought, provided the key to the interpretation of "Bright Star," with its lines such as the following: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute."

There are powerful arguments against such approaches. How is it possible to reconstruct an author's intention in a literary work, since he or she may not even have been conscious of it? The poet often is his or her own worst interpreter. How

<sup>11</sup>S. Bermann, "Revolution in Literary Criticism," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, Nov. 21, 1984, p. 10.

can we get back into the mind of the poet? The latter is a problem obviously heightened in the study of an ancient text.

As discussed below, the New Critics of the forties and fifties moved away from authorial intent, a view formalized by Wimsatt and Beardsley in their description of the "intentional fallacy" and their concomitant focus on the text alone in their own interpretive strategy.<sup>12</sup> The intentional fallacy may be defined as a view that:

claimed that whether the author has expressly stated what his intention was in writing a poem, or whether it is merely inferred from what we know about his life and opinions, his intention is irrelevant to the literary critic, because meaning and value reside within the text of the finished, free-standing, and public work of literature itself.<sup>13</sup>

Certainly the argument of the intentional fallacy has some measure of validity. Traditional critics spent so much time discussing the life and habits of authors that they lost sight of the text before them. The New Critics did a great service, as we will see, in directing attention to the text itself in the interpretive process.

#### E. D. HIRSCH

It is dangerous, however, to move completely away from any consideration of authorial intention, which is the decided direction of contemporary literary theory. E. D. Hirsch is an important contemporary advocate for the importance of the author.<sup>14</sup> Hirsch maintains that to lose sight of the author's intention in writing a text will result in the loss of any established meaning of a text. The author's intention provides a kind of anchor in the sea of interpretive relativity. For Hirsch,

<sup>12</sup>W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," reprinted in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (University Press of Kentucky, 1954), pp. 3-18. Some leading New Critics softened their view on intention later.

<sup>13</sup>Abrams, *Glossary*, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup>E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); and idem, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

the meaning of a text is to be identified with the author's intended purpose. He is aware of all of the methodological difficulties associated with his position, notably the problem of recovering with certainty an author's purpose. After all, authors are usually not very explicit in literary works.

Hirsch's approach is interesting in that he approaches the author's meaning through a study of the text itself, particularly its genre. In other words, he infers the author's meaning primarily through a careful study of the text in relationship to other closely related texts. This move is important and approaches the balanced view that I advocate in chapter 3 below. Furthermore, Hirsch does not completely ignore the role of the reader in interpretation. He does not accept certain reader-response theories that argue that readers create meaning. Nevertheless, he does recognize that different readers will draw out different implications from the same text. He makes a distinction at this point between "meaning" and "significance." We have already seen that meaning is to be related to the author's intention. "Significance" of a literary work refers to the application that readers draw on the basis of their own background and interests.

#### Biblical Studies

While much of importance separates them, both critical and evangelical interpretation traditionally have focused on the author. The former has developed critical tools to enable the interpreter to go behind the final form of the text to its original setting, and the latter spends much energy on fixing and describing the time period in which the author wrote. If the author is known by name, then biographical information is utilized in interpretation.

#### HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

Traditional criticism, also referred to as the historical-critical method, is usually contrasted with a literary approach. As pointed out in the introduction, historical critics and literary critics often define their positions as conflicting with each other.

On another level, however, traditional criticism is a type of literary approach. It bears some resemblance to pre-New Critical approaches that seek the meaning of a text in the light of a knowledge of the author and the author's background. In biblical studies this orientation manifests itself in the concern to interpret a text in the light of its *original* setting.

The difference between traditional literary theory and traditional biblical criticism against contemporary forms of both is the difference between a diachronic and a synchronic approach. Roughly speaking a diachronic approach to literature examines the historical development of literature and is concerned with changes over time. On the other hand, a synchronic approach concentrates on one stage (usually the final form of the text), regardless of its prehistory.

Traditional critics developed tools for the study of the biblical text that were intended to recover the history of the text's development. They wanted to recover the original text and its setting. Explicitly or implicitly, these critics made the assumption that the meaning resides in its origin and has been distorted by its use in later forms. The tools most commonly associated with traditional criticism are source, form, and redaction criticism. Much could be written about each of these approaches, but for the purposes of this chapter, brief descriptions will be given. The interested reader may refer to the secondary literature cited in the footnotes.

No one has ever doubted that biblical authors utilized sources in the composition of certain books.<sup>15</sup> The author/editor of the books of Kings actually cites certain documents. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, hypothetical sources became the object of intense scrutiny. Source criticism of the Pentateuch came into its own primarily under the influence of Julius Wellhausen.<sup>16</sup> Since that time, the main

<sup>15</sup>Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 1–29; N. Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); R. E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

<sup>16</sup>J. Wellhausen, *Geschichte Israels I* (Marburg, 1878); 2d ed., *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (1883; Eng. trans., *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, 1885). See

impetus in Pentateuchal studies has been the delineation, description, and dating of the various preexisting sources that make up the Torah. Source criticism is not restricted to the Pentateuch, but it began in earnest in this portion of Scripture. Use of different divine names, doublets, and other types of repetition and supposed contradictions are some of the criteria used to distinguish one source from another. The result of the study of sources is to move away from the final form of the text to its prehistory. The method is thus diachronic. Furthermore, it fragments the final form of the text into a number of sources. Both of these tendencies are resisted by modern literary approaches to the study of the Bible. It is not surprising that the modern tendency in Pentateuchal studies is to move away from source analysis.<sup>17</sup>

Form criticism developed partly in reaction to source criticism, though it does not necessarily conflict with it.<sup>18</sup> As formulated by Gunkel and others, form criticism too is a diachronic method, seeking to discover the *original* form and setting of a particular biblical passage. The implicit assumption is that the key to the meaning of a passage is located in its original use and not in its final (distorted) form. Form criticism studies a text in the light of other texts that are similar in terms of structure, content, language, and so forth. Gunkel argued that each form had one and only one setting and that that setting was a sociological one. Sigmund Mowinckel, a student of Gunkel's, argued, for instance, that the Psalms for the most part found their original home in an annual enthronement festival.

The next logical step is redaction criticism.<sup>19</sup> Once again it is partly a reaction against its past—in this case, form criticism.

now J. Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism in the Nineteenth Century: England and Germany* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>17</sup>I. M. Kikawa and A. Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1–11* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

<sup>18</sup>Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 30–44; Tucker, *Form Criticism*; for a more detailed discussion and fuller bibliography, see my "Form Criticism, Recent Developments in Genre Theory and the Evangelical," *WTJ* 47 (1985): 46–67.

<sup>19</sup>Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 45–76; J. A. Wharton, "Redaction Criticism, Old Testament," *IDB*, Supplementary Volume, 729–32.

Form criticism tended to fragment a text. The concern was to *isolate* a passage from its context in the biblical text and study it in the light of its prehistory. Redaction criticism deals with the shape of the final form. What principles were active in the bringing together of these isolated forms? This approach usually tries to identify the theological concerns of the redactor, or editor, the so-called *Tendenz*. Redaction criticism is obviously helpful in the study of the Gospels or Kings and Chronicles, where the same events are being presented two or more times. It becomes much more tentative where there is no parallel text to serve as a control. Redaction criticism is a step beyond both source and form criticism in looking for the hand that drew the text into its final form. With redaction criticism we are moving closer to what we recognize as contemporary literary criticism with its interest on the final form of the text.

These brief descriptions of source, form, and redaction criticism show a contrast with the agenda of modern literary approaches. The difference may be summarized as the difference between a diachronic and a synchronic approach. The diachronic approach asks questions that are extrinsic to the text itself: Who is the author? What are the author's characteristics? What is the historical background of the text? and so forth. Implicitly or explicitly, the interpretive key is thought to lie outside of the text itself in its origin or background. These questions still arise in literary theory, but the approach to literature that they imply is now recognized as obsolete or problematic. Advocates of a literary approach tend to reject, ignore, or seriously modify these tools of historical criticism. Recently, however, there have been attempts at synthesis.<sup>20</sup>

#### TRADITIONAL EVANGELICAL APPROACHES

Evangelicals, for the most part, have also assumed that the meaning of a text resides in the author's intention and the historical background. The *historical-grammatical* approach to interpretation has emphasized the need to study the Bible in the

<sup>20</sup>V. Philips Longs, "The Reign and Rejection of King Saul" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1987).

light of its historical origin. Of course, the major difference with traditional critical approaches is that the text has been identified with its canonical form, the final form of the text. A recent, lucid defense of identifying the meaning of a text with the author's intention is that of Walter Kaiser. Kaiser applied the theory of E. D. Hirsch to the situation of biblical exegesis and boldly stated, "The *author's* intended meaning is what a text means."<sup>21</sup>

### TEXT-CENTERED THEORIES

#### Literary Studies

Extreme cases of the traditional approach studied everything but the work of literature itself. The reaction came in the 1940s and continues until the present day. Critics have shifted dramatically from a study of the origin and development of a piece of literature to a study of the text itself. Since text-oriented theories focus on the poem or prose narrative, they are collectively referred to as an objective theory of interpretation as opposed to a mimetic or expressive theory.<sup>22</sup> Two major schools of thought will be presented at this point: New Criticism and structuralism.

#### NEW CRITICISM

New Criticism describes a general trend in literary theory that dominated thinking in the 1940s and 1950s. While many differences of opinion existed among the various scholars identified with this school of thought, they were united on the major points discussed below. Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and W. K. Wimsatt in the United States and F. R. Leavis in Britain are a few of the prominent scholars usually associated with New Criticism. The roots of the movement, however, may be traced to the thought of T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, and W. Empson. The name may be traced to the title

<sup>21</sup>W. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 33.

<sup>22</sup>For this terminology, see Barton, "Classifying."

of John Crowe Ransom's book *The New Criticism*, published in 1941. Many of the concerns of this predominantly Anglo-American school are shared by Russian formalism, but discussion of this latter school will be delayed until later, since there is a direct connection with structuralism.

The primary tenet of New Criticism may be expressed positively and negatively: the literary work is self-sufficient; the author's intention and background are unimportant to the critic. New Critics speak of the literary text as an artifact or verbal icon. Both of these metaphors express the self-sufficiency of the literary work. Such critics require (indeed must restrict themselves to) only the text and do not use outside, or extrinsic, information in its interpretation. The self-sufficiency of the literary text implies the denial of the author. The author does not speak from a position of privilege or special insight into his or her own text. Here, New Criticism parts company with traditional interpretation, not only of the first part of this century, but since the Enlightenment.

The self-sufficiency of the text further implies the necessity for a close reading of the text. If meaning resides in the text itself, it may be discovered only through careful analysis. Such close reading analyzes the complex interrelationships within the work itself. The study of poetic ambiguity (in the sense of multiple meaning), tension, irony, and paradox are examples of the literary concerns of New Critical scholars.

In the late 1950s New Criticism faded as the dominant force in literary studies.<sup>23</sup> Until that time the ideas associated with New Criticism were widespread, being taught even on the high-school level. It is not surprising, therefore, that its influence was felt on biblical studies as well. M. Weiss, for example, explicitly states and applies the principles of New Criticism to the interpretation of the biblical text.<sup>24</sup> Weiss cites various New Critical theories to justify his rejection of external approaches to the meaning of a passage of Scripture and to read the text "closely." He is concerned with the interpretation of

<sup>23</sup>F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup>Weiss, *The Bible from Within*.

the whole poem as it stands, thus the name *total interpretation* for his approach. His book begins with studies of texts on the word and phrase levels. He continues with an analysis of sentences and sequences of sentences and then concludes with research on structure and whole texts. The outline of his book illustrates his twin concerns with close reading and with the text as a whole.

The "Sheffield school" and those more or less associated with it (mostly through the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*) have in the past adopted many of New Criticism's insights into biblical exegesis. Good examples may be cited in D. Gunn's stimulating studies of the Saul and David materials.<sup>25</sup> See also A. Berlin's work.<sup>26</sup>

J. Barton has advanced the provocative thesis that B. Childs's "canonical method" is formally related to New Criticism.<sup>27</sup> Childs himself, Barton concedes, distances himself from any literary justification for his approach. Nonetheless, Childs's treatment of biblical texts as self-sufficient and as understood within a literary tradition (canon) bears a close relationship to the principles of New Criticism.

## STRUCTURALISM

New Criticism has had a relatively minor impact on biblical studies. In contrast, structuralism is of major importance in contemporary research on the Old and New Testaments. Structuralism describes a broad movement that affects many disciplines. Linguistics, anthropology, law, philosophy, and sociology are just a few, though perhaps the most discussed, of the fields of study in which an application of structural thinking may be found. Structuralism is broad in a second sense as well. Vastly different approaches are placed under the structuralist umbrella. As Poythress has stated, "Structuralism is more a diverse collection of methods, paradigms and personal preferences than it is a 'system,' a theory or

<sup>25</sup>D. Gunn, *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (JSOT Supp. 6; Sheffield: JSOT, 1978); idem, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of a Biblical Story* (JSOT Supp. 14; Sheffield: JSOT, 1980).

<sup>26</sup>Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*.

<sup>27</sup>Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 140-57.

a well formulated thesis."<sup>28</sup> Most important, perhaps, structuralism is broad in that it claims to be, "not a method of inquiry, but a general theory about human culture."<sup>29</sup>

By necessity then, our brief description of structuralism will be simplistic. After a short history of the development of structuralism, the main principles will be displayed and discussed. The structuralism presented here might be called the conservative version, associated with the early R. Barthes and the summarizing work of J. Culler.

*History of development.* The linguist Ferdinand de Saussure turned the attention of his field to the sign nature of language. He is commonly credited as the father of structuralism, though a lesser-known precursor is Charles S. Peirce. Saussure, whose major work is really the posthumous compilation of his lecture notes, proposed a series of distinctions that set the stage for modern studies.<sup>30</sup> His most famous division is between *langue* and *parole*. The former may be defined as "a system, an institution, a set of interpersonal rules and norms."<sup>31</sup> The latter refers to actual sentences used in writing or speaking. The second distinction identifies the two aspects of a sign, particularly the linguistic sign: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier refers to the word, or acoustical image, while the signified pertains to the concept evoked by the signifier. Consider the word *dog*. The combination of the letters themselves, or, better, the phonemes represented by the letters, are the signifier. The concept (not the object, since the dog may be a nonexistent, metaphorical dog) evoked by the signifier is an animal of a certain species. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is *arbitrary* in that there is no inherent, predetermined relationship between the acoustical image and the concept. This fact may be demonstrated easily by noting the different words used in various languages to refer to the animal English speakers call *dog*.

<sup>28</sup>V. S. Poythress, "Structuralism and Biblical Studies," *JETS* 21 (1978): 221.

<sup>29</sup>Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 112.

<sup>30</sup>F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959).

<sup>31</sup>Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 8.

A third distinction places syntagmatic analysis over against paradigmatic analysis. This distinction is illustrated most simply on the level of the sentence. In *the man saw the wolf*, a syntagmatic approach would analyze the five words in the sentence in their relationships to each other. A paradigmatic analysis, on the other hand, examines each slot in the sentence: *the man / saw / the wolf*. As McKnight states it: "Paradigmatic relationships of a word are those which may replace it in a sentence without making the sentence unacceptable."<sup>32</sup> These words are related as a group, and the use of any one will call into mind the others. For instance, *saw* could be replaced by *observed*, *espied*, or the like. This third Saussurian distinction is particularly important in differentiating the variation between Propp's and Lévi-Strauss's method of studying narrative (see below).

Meanwhile in Moscow and later in Prague, literary scholars (as a group labeled Russian formalists) were exploring avenues that eventually led to common concerns and approaches with European and American structuralists.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the connection is embodied in one prominent practitioner of structuralism, Roman Jakobson. Jakobson was involved with the Moscow Linguistic Circle (founded in 1915), moved to Prague when the Moscow group was suppressed by the Soviets, and eventually ended up in New York, where he influenced the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. A second major figure of Russian formalism whose work provided a direct influence on the development of structuralist approaches to narrative is V. Propp.

Structuralism as a major school of literary criticism really began only in the 1960s. H. Felperin would date the coming of age of literary structuralism to 1966, the year in which Roland Barthes published *Critique et vérité*.<sup>34</sup> Here, Barthes proclaimed the importance of what he called the "science of literature,"

<sup>32</sup>McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader*, p. 7.

<sup>33</sup>F. Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 43-98; most recently, McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader*, pp. 16-19.

<sup>34</sup>H. Felperin, *Beyond Deconstruction* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), p. 74.

which is concerned not with the interpretation of particular works but with the "conditions of meaning." He and others such as Todorov desired to describe a "grammar" of literature.

*Major principles.* A major impetus for the development of structuralism in the area of literary criticism was the desire to be "scientific," to raise literary studies from the realm of the subjective to the objective—that is, to provide literature with a method of analysis that could be demonstrated and repeated. As R. C. Culley summarized it, structuralists "are seeking a method which is scientific in the sense that they are striving for a rigorous statement and an exacting analytical model."<sup>35</sup> More recent structuralist studies do not take such a radically scientific approach.<sup>36</sup>

Structuralism developed from linguistics. In particular, the development traces to Saussure's insight into the nature of the sign in linguistics. Another common name for this field is semiotics (from the Greek word for *sign*). Words are perhaps the clearest examples of Saussure's thought as he discussed the workings of signs. Structuralism as a whole may be defined as the extension of the linguistic metaphor to other semiotic systems. Literature is considered by structuralists to be a "second-order semiotic system," in that literary texts are constructed from language. Literature and literary texts are, therefore, capable of structuralist analysis.

The analogy between linguistics and literature leads to insights into the nature of literature. The two most important ideas for our purposes are literary competence and literature as systemic. The conception of literary competence may be traced back to Saussure's foundational distinction between *langue* and *parole*, or abstract rules and actual utterances. Speakers of a language do not have a complete or explicit knowledge of all the rules. These rules are "tacitly shared by members of a

<sup>35</sup>R. C. Culley, "Exploring New Directions," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 174.

<sup>36</sup>R. Polzin, *Biblical Structuralism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), esp. chap. 1, "What Is Structuralism?"

speech community."<sup>37</sup> The internalization of *langue* permits the understanding of any particular utterance. When studying a second language, for instance, the student learns the rules of morphology and syntax, memorizes basic vocabulary, and thus becomes competent in that language. Noam Chomsky popularized the notions of *competence*, which describes the mastery of the basic rules of a language, and *performance*, which concerns the production of actual sentences.<sup>38</sup>

Early structuralist critics extended this linguistic notion to literature. One becomes competent in a literary tradition or literature in general by learning the syntax, or rules, of narrative. Deep underlying structures may be discerned that cut across literature as a whole. Another way of describing these rules is to call them *conventions*.

Structuralists and their interpreters often illustrate these ideas by using game analogies. American football, for example, is played by a set of rules that are not too difficult to assimilate or internalize, but unless they are learned, one cannot play the game or even follow it. To become competent in football entails learning the rules and conventions of the game (i.e., a forward pass is permissible, a lineman may not go downfield on a pass play, etc.).

Literary conventions are numerous and depend on the type of literature being analyzed. Indeed, genre is a way of describing a convention of literature. The interpreter needs to distinguish between prose and poetry, novel and lyric, etc. Such an approach to literature leads to the suppression of both the author and the reader in structuralist thought. As Culler describes it: "The [structuralist] concepts of *écriture* and *lecture* have been brought to the fore so as to divert attention from the author as source and the work as object and focus it instead on two correlated networks of convention: writing as an institution and reading as an activity."<sup>39</sup>

To put it perhaps in extreme form, writers are not seen as

<sup>37</sup>Ahrams, *Glossary*, p. 95.

<sup>38</sup>Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 131.

original contributors to their work but as users of previous devices. Their work is a conglomeration of previous works. Since, by necessity, only established literary conventions can be used, the meaning of the work is found in the convention rather than the intention of the author. The common use of literary conventions describes the structuralist notion *intertextuality*. According to Julia Kristeva, "Every text takes shape as a mosaic of citations, every text is the absorption and transformation of other texts. The notion of intertextuality comes to take the place of the notion of intersubjectivity."<sup>40</sup> The reader meets the same fate. The competent reader has assimilated the conventions. He or she brings nothing to the interpretation of the text besides an explicit and implicit knowledge of how literature "works." In short, the meaning of a text resides in the conventional code, which has a public meaning, not in the author's intention or in the reader's preunderstanding. Reading is a "rule-governed process."<sup>41</sup> According to Robert Scholes, both readers and authors are "divided psyches traversed by codes."<sup>42</sup>

Besides the idea of literary competence, the notion of *literature as systemic* represents a second insight provided by the structuralist analogy between linguistics and literature. The division between the conventional nature of literature and literature as a system is artificial. The system of literature is composed of the various conventions. Once again it is helpful to begin with an illustration from linguistics. Phonemes, words, and sentences have no inherent meaning. Meaning is communicated by way of contrast within a closed system. For instance, the forms *pat* and *bat* are phonologically distinguished by the difference between *p* and *b*, which is a difference between voicelessness and voice. But *p* and *b* have meaning only in the system of English phonemes and particularly in contrast to one another. On the level of the distinctive feature, we notice

<sup>40</sup>*Semiotikè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Seuil, Paris, 1969), p. 146. Quoted in Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 9.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>42</sup>R. Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 14.

*binarism*, another characteristic feature of structuralism. Structuralists "look for functional oppositions in whatever material they are studying."<sup>43</sup> According to Barton, structuralists

tend to argue that all structures within which meaning can be generated, whether they be linguistic, social or aesthetic, can be analyzed in terms of pairs of opposites. . . . To be able to say what meaning is to be attached to an utterance, a gesture or an object, we need to know what it is not, as well as what it is: to know from what range of possibilities it has been selected, and what was excluded when it was chosen.<sup>44</sup>

Rigorous structuralists argue that, like computers, the human brain perceives and processes data according to the principle of binarism.

*Structuralist approaches to prose narrative.* Structuralism has emphasized prose narrative over against poetry. Structuralist study of plot and character in prose stories has had a major impact on the analysis of biblical texts. I thus describe briefly the development of structuralist thinking in this area, followed by the application of structuralism to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

I restrict my survey of structuralist approaches to prose narrative to its beginnings with V. Propp and the later refinements of A. J. Greimas. To be complete, one would need to examine the later insights of R. Barthes (in his work *S/Z*), T. Todorov, and others. Space will not permit such a survey.<sup>45</sup> In any case, the majority of biblical studies that adopt a structuralist perspective are theoretically dependent on Propp and Greimas.

Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* deserves to be noted as one of the major contributions of Russian formalism.<sup>46</sup> Propp wrote a "morphology" or "poetics" of the folktale. He analyzed the folktale as consisting of two elements: roles and

<sup>43</sup>Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, p. 14.

<sup>44</sup>Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 111.

<sup>45</sup>See the summary (with bibliography) of McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader*, pp. 49-58.

<sup>46</sup>V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2d ed., trans. L. A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

functions. In examining approximately a hundred Russian tales, he concluded that there was a structure to be discerned under the surface of the text. This insight led him to describe a finite number of roles and functions that surface in actual tales in different guises.

According to Propp there are seven roles, or "spheres of actions": the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero, and the false hero. Specific characters may fill more than one of these roles in a particular folktale, but these categories exhaust the possibilities for characters.

Propp defines a function as "an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action."<sup>47</sup> There are thirty-one functions, according to Propp, and while not all functions occur in any one text, they always occur in the same sequence. By way of illustration, I list here the first five of Propp's functions:

1. A member of a family leaves home (*absentation*).
2. An *interdiction* is addressed to the hero.
3. There is a *violation* of the interdiction.
4. The villain makes an attempt at *reconnaissance*.
5. The villain receives information about his victim (*delivery*).

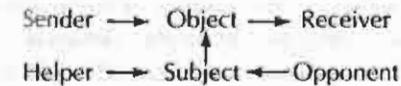
Greimas builds on Propp's analysis and refines it so that it is more manageable.<sup>48</sup> The refinement takes a decided turn under the influence of Lévi-Strauss.<sup>49</sup> Propp's analysis may be categorized as a syntagmatic approach that follows the linear sequence of the story. Lévi-Strauss adopts a paradigmatic stance that departs from the order of the story as given and probes the structure through the analysis of "schemata" that "exist simultaneously, superimposed on one another on planes with

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>48</sup>A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. D. McDowell et. al. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

<sup>49</sup>Cf. McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader*, pp. 53-54; R. Scheiffer, "Introduction" to Greimas, *Structural Semantics*.

different levels of abstraction."<sup>50</sup> He is best known for his description of the oppositional character of Propp's "spheres of action." He refers to these spheres as *actants* and charts the relationship between them in a tale in the following way:



The opposition in the tale occurs between the subject and the object, the sender versus the receiver, and the helper versus the opponent. By setting Propp's functions in binary opposition, Lévi-Strauss also reduces their number to twenty.

### Biblical Studies

As mentioned, biblical scholars most frequently appeal to the work of Greimas to provide the theoretical basis for their structuralist study of the Bible. These scholars have particularly used his actantial model, which is only a part or one level of his analysis. Scheiffer has noted:

Most commentators on Greimas . . . have taken Greimas's *actantial* analysis as the central feature of his semantics of discourse, and while this is not incorrect, it has the tendency to make the technique of actantial analysis the pinnacle of Greimas's pyramid rather than to position it as a structure which both crowns and supports its neighboring structures in a kind of geodesic dome.<sup>51</sup>

Greimas and other structuralist writers—as well as their commentators—are often unclear in their theoretical expression. Scholes finds that Greimas is "frequently crabbed and cryptic."<sup>52</sup> The result is that biblical scholars are at odds

<sup>50</sup>McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader*, p. 52.

<sup>51</sup>Scheiffer, "Introduction," p. xli.

<sup>52</sup>Quoted in J. D. Crossan, "Comments on the Article of Daniel Patte," *Semeia* 2 (1974): 121.

concerning the correct application of his theory to particular texts. More basic disagreement occurs regarding the value of structural analysis for the exegetical task.

These issues may be most clearly observed by referring to the essays of Patte, Crespy, Crossan, and Tannehill in *Semeia* (1974), which focus on the analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Each attempts to apply Greimas's model to the parable and comes up with strikingly different results. I discuss Patte's analysis here, since it perhaps most accurately applies Greimas's model to the text.

Patte's structuralist analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35) acknowledges Greimas's three structural levels—deep, superficial (intermediate), and surface—but Patte really treats only the middle level of narrative structure. Furthermore, he divides this middle level of analysis into two types: semiotic and semantic, with the strong emphasis on the latter.

The semantic narrative structure is in turn divided into "six hierarchically distinct elements" by Patte, following Greimas. They are "sequence, syntagm, utterance, actantial model, function, and actant."<sup>53</sup> Each of these items is briefly explained by Patte and situated in his overall method.

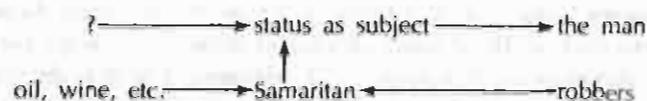
Patte begins his analysis of the parable by separating the sequences, which he does by analyzing the disjunctive functions (the "movements and encounters of actors") within the parable. This analysis uncovers eight sequences in the text of the parable, which transform themselves somehow (no explanation is given) into seven *lexie*.

Patte applies the actantial model of Greimas to each of the *lexie* (unlike Crossan, who develops it for the text as a whole). Since in this section I can give little more than a taste of this type of analysis, I discuss here only the model for *lexie* 6: "and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of

<sup>53</sup>D. Patte, "Narrative and Structure and the Good Samaritan," *Semeia* 2 (1974): 121.

him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeepers. . . ." (vv. 34-35 rsv).

Applying Greimas's actantial model to this text, we note that the sender is unknown; the object is the injured man's "status as subject," that is, his recovery; and the receiver is therefore the injured man. The subject, or hero, according to Propp's terminology, is the Samaritan; the opponents are the robbers (even though they are not mentioned in this *lexie*, Patte carries them over); and the helpers include the oil, wine, donkey, money, and innkeeper.



Such, in brief, is the type of analysis Patte and others use for biblical exegesis. He states that such an analysis serves the function of "reducing the narrative to its basic elements," which "clarifies what 'happens' in the text."<sup>54</sup> Both Crossan and Patte, however, believe that the importance of such studies really is found elsewhere in a "complete and systematic investigation of the forms and genres of the New Testament."<sup>55</sup> This claim has yet to be demonstrated. Perhaps, as Culley in his rather reserved praise of structuralism puts it, "Real insights are gained into the phenomenon of literature."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, its high level of complexity, its almost esoteric terminology, and its (thus far) very limited help toward understanding the text (which for many structuralists is not even a concern) have and likely will prevent the vast majority of biblical scholars from actively participating in the endeavor.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>55</sup>Crossan, "Comments on the Article," p. 122.

<sup>56</sup>Culley, "Exploring," p. 177.

## READER-CENTERED THEORIES

## Literary Studies

So far we have surveyed theories that have placed the locus of meaning in the author and in the text. In addition, a number of recent approaches concentrate on the reader's role in the production of meaning.

Anyone who has worked with a number of students on a literary text knows that it is possible to obtain as many interpretations of the text as there are students in the class. Different readers will interpret the same text sometimes similarly, sometimes in vastly different ways. If meaning is not inherent in the author's intention or in the text itself, how are we to evaluate these different interpretations? One response is to say that they are all equally valid. Meaning resides in the reader, not in the text. The reader creates the meaning of the text.

Many reader-response theories, however, are more limited, holding that the reader *in interaction with the text* produces meaning. According to E. V. McKnight:

The relationship between reader as subject (acting upon the text) and the reader as object (being acted upon by the text), however, is not seen as an opposition but as two sides of the same coin. It is only as the reader is subject of text and language that the reader becomes object. It is as the reader becomes object that the fullness of the reader's needs and desires as subject are met.<sup>57</sup>

In this view, readers are not free to do what they will with the text but are constrained by the text in their interpretation.

Who is the reader according to these theories? Differences abound. Some refer to any old reader; others have in mind a "superreader," "informed reader," "ideal reader," or, in structuralist terms, the completely competent reader.<sup>58</sup> We do not need to solve these problems. We simply recognize that certain theorists concentrate on the reader's role in the process of interpretation.

<sup>57</sup> McKnight, *The Bible and the Reader*, p. 128.

<sup>58</sup> R. M. Fowler, "Who Is 'the Reader' in Reader Response Criticism," *Soucia* 31 (1985): 5-23.

## Biblical Studies

Thus far few biblical scholars have argued for an exclusively reader-response approach to exegesis. Scholars, however, are increasingly recognizing the role of the reader in interpretation. For instance, Anthony Thiselton describes the act of interpretation as a bridging of two horizons: that of the text and that of the reader. Significantly, he does not call for a complete divestment of the reader's preunderstanding as one encounters the text.<sup>59</sup>

The most frequent appeal to reader-response theory in biblical studies comes from those who might be called "ideological readers." Here I refer to those who read the Scriptures with a definite, usually political, agenda. The two most prominent types of ideological readers today are liberation theologians and feminist scholars.

Liberation theologians read the text, attending primarily to what they perceive are the needs of their contemporary society, doing so in the light of the modern political philosophy of Marxism.<sup>60</sup> Such a reading will bring certain elements of the text into prominence, in particular, those texts concerning the liberation of the oppressed. The Exodus, which is certainly a major biblical theme, takes on even larger proportions in the writings of theologians of liberation.

There are many differences among biblical scholars who operate under the rubric of feminism.<sup>61</sup> Some wish simply to explore the characters, books, and themes that are relevant to the situation of the modern woman. Studies of female characters, such as the wives of David, are an example. Others want to read the whole text from a female perspective to see what difference it makes for the implied reader to be a woman. Still others wish to read the Bible as women in order to "explode the

<sup>59</sup> A. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

<sup>60</sup> I include here not only those scholars who recognize that they are reader-response critics but some who would assert that they are text oriented (e.g., N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* [Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979]).

<sup>61</sup> See the collected studies and bibliographies in *JSOT* 22 (1982).

myth of patriarchy"—that is, to show the innate prejudice of the Scriptures against women and to expose the Bible as a tool of oppression. They are united in the sense that they approach the text with an agenda. Many utilize reader-response theory for their theoretical justification.

While extreme forms of liberation theology and feminism must be rejected and caution must be taken regarding all forms of ideological reading on the grounds that distortion is possible or even likely, much may nevertheless be learned from these perspectives. These readers bring out themes of Scripture that are commonly passed over by most readers of the Bible—concern for the poor, the role of women, and so forth.

We must remember that *no one* can approach the biblical text objectively or with a completely open mind. Indeed, such an approach to the text would be undesirable. Everyone comes to the text with questions and an agenda. One's attitude, however, should be one of openness toward change.

Consideration of the need for openness leads to a brief comment on contextualization.<sup>62</sup> Evangelical theologians and biblical scholars are becoming increasingly sensitive to the fact that each reader approaches the Scriptures with certain cultural and personal questions and assumptions.<sup>63</sup> We are not neutral and objective as we approach the text. We come at it from different perspectives. This preunderstanding will influence our interpretation of Scripture. The issue is not one of incorrect interpretation but of our giving prominence to certain parts of the text and not to others. We might read, say, the Song of Songs as a single man or woman and then some time later as a young married person and find that our attention is drawn to different aspects of the text.

Christian thinkers recognize this phenomenon as existing also between cultures. A Christian from Egypt, one from the United States, and one from China will each come to the text with different questions and needs. The Scriptures are the same

<sup>62</sup> See H. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

<sup>63</sup> See Thielson, *The Two Horizons*.

for each. The preunderstanding of the interpreter encounters the text and *must* conform to it. Contextualization implies not that the interpreter creates meaning but simply that the interpretation of the biblical text involves its application to the respective contemporary situations.

## DECONSTRUCTION

### Literary Studies

The cutting edge of literary studies in the mid-1980s is deconstruction.<sup>64</sup> It is the "new wave" from France. Like the previous imports (existentialism, structuralism), deconstruction has brought strong reactions, both positive and negative, from English and American scholars.

I discuss deconstruction at the end of this survey of literary theory, not simply because it is the most prominent of recent approaches. Each of the other theories emphasizes one of the elements of the act of literary communication: author, text, or reader. Deconstruction, on the contrary, questions the grounds of all these approaches. Culler, in his insightful analysis comments, "It demonstrates the difficulties of any theory that would define meaning in a univocal way; as what an author intends, what conventions determine, what a reader experiences."<sup>65</sup> Deconstruction, therefore, stands outside of the pattern of the other theories and is treated separately.

As with New Criticism and structuralism, it must be said that deconstruction is "[not a] method, system, or settled body of ideas."<sup>66</sup> This caveat takes on special force since, as will be seen below, deconstruction is constantly in danger of taking itself too seriously and thus becoming another text-centered theory.

<sup>64</sup> There are already indications, however, that the deconstruction school is no longer avant-garde. D. Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), is a post-deconstructionist statement in hermeneutics.

<sup>65</sup> J. Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 131.

<sup>66</sup> C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 1.

Deconstruction is most closely associated with Jacques Derrida. His first major writings appeared in 1967, but his major influence came in the 1970s and continues in the 1980s. Derrida is part philosopher and part literary critic, but his impact has occurred in the latter field, though in his hands the division between these two disciplines becomes quite fluid. Derrida, indeed, attacks the Western philosophical tradition that subordinates writing to speaking. Since at least Plato, speech has been thought to bear a closer relationship to pure thought than does writing. Writing removes communication a step further from authorial presence. Derrida argues that this attitude, which underlies Western philosophy, demonstrates a stubborn belief in *presence*. Ultimately, such a belief is grounded in what he calls "a transcendental signified," which Abrams describes as "an absolute foundation, outside the play of language itself, which is adequate to 'center' (that is, to anchor and organize) the linguistic system in such a way as to fix the particular meaning of a spoken or written discourse within that system."<sup>67</sup>

Derrida argues instead for the priority of writing over speech. He believes that writing is a clearer illustration of what characterizes all language acts: the slippage between sign and referent, signifier and signified. Derrida's extreme language skepticism calls into question the act of literary communication. Characteristic of Derrida is an analysis of pivotal philosophers such as Plato, Rousseau, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, and Austin. He exposes their *logocentrism* (belief in a "metaphysics of presence"), which is implied in their fundamental *phonocentrism* (priority of speech over writing). He probes the text of these philosophers until he uncovers an *aporia* (a basic contradiction), which usually involves the philosopher's use of metaphor or some other rhetorical device. Metaphor is key in this regard because it displays the slippage between sign and referent. Its use by the philosopher demonstrates, contra the philosophers, that the truth claims of philosophy are no different from those of fiction.

<sup>67</sup>Abrams, *Glossary*, p. 38.

The fundamental force behind Derrida's writing is his heightening the distance between signifier and signified. Here he threatens the possibility of literary communication. He begins with Saussure's premise that a sign has no inherent meaning but finds meaning only in distinction to other elements in the semiotic system. Meaning is thus a function not of presence but of absence. Derrida's concept of *différance* is helpful here. (The *a* in *différance* shows that the word is a neologism, constructed from two different French words, one meaning "to differ," the other "to defer.") The meaning of a linguistic or literary sign is based on its difference in comparison with other signs and as such is always deferred, or delayed. With deconstruction one enters the "endless labyrinth."<sup>68</sup> Meaning is never established; the pun becomes the favored interpretive device.

The main bastion of American deconstruction has been at Yale. G. Hartman, H. Bloom, P. DeMan, and J. Hillis Miller, though different from Derrida and from each other, have been identified as his most able representatives.<sup>69</sup> Some advocates for deconstruction have expressed fear that deconstruction may be threatened by its routine use in the study of texts. They fear that some scholars are applying Derrida's style of analysis to texts mechanically, which may signal its demise.

At present, however, deconstruction is alive and well and is threatened seriously only by Marxist or political interpreters. Marxist interpreters disdain deconstruction, since it removes literature and the critic from any meaningful interaction with the world. Derrida's motto "there is nothing outside of the text" irritates them. The clash between this-worldly and no-worldly interpretation will continue into the next decade.

Michael Edwards provides brief, but tantalizing, comments on deconstruction from a Christian perspective.<sup>70</sup> Instead of criticizing Derrida, he points out the fundamental insight into

<sup>68</sup>Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, p. 166.

<sup>69</sup>See V. B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), and more popularly, Campbell, "Tyranny."

<sup>70</sup>M. Edwards, *Towards a Christian Poetics* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

the nature of language that Derrida provides. Edwards does not gainsay Derrida's fundamental atheism but points out that like most non-Christian philosophers, Derrida builds on an essentially true insight. Edwards claims that Derrida is right to point out the extreme difficulties in communication. There are fissures or breaks between words and their referents. Derrida attributes this slippage to an absence of the "transcendental signified" (i.e., God), Edwards to the Fall.

### Biblical Studies

Presently there are few signs of Derridean influence on biblical studies. We have observed, however, that every major school of thought has eventually influenced biblical studies, and there is no reason to doubt that deconstruction will follow suit.

To say that no influence has been registered would be incorrect. *Semeia* 23 (1982) is entitled *Derrida and Biblical Studies*. Furthermore, the New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has been active in bringing Derrida's thought to bear on issues of interpretation. This influence is most readily seen in his book *Cliffs of Fall: Paradox and Polyvalence in the Parables of Jesus* (1980), in which he analyzes the parables from a Derridean perspective. He finds that the metaphoricity of the parable has a "void of meaning at its core. . . . it can mean so many things and generate so many differing interpretations because it has no fixed, univocal or absolute meaning to begin with."<sup>71</sup> Instead of searching for the meaning of the parable, he *plays* (a favorite metaphor of deconstructive method) with the words of the text.

Perhaps the most explicit deconstructive study of Old Testament texts is found in Peter Miscall's *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*. He devotes the bulk of his book to a close reading of Genesis 12 and 1 Samuel 16–22. For Miscall, such a reading reveals information that is insufficient for arriving at a single meaning. "There is, at the same time, too little and too much of the narrative, too few and too many details, and this

<sup>71</sup>J. D. Crossan, *Cliffs of Fall* (New York: Seabury, 1980), pp. 9–10; see also G. Aichele, Jr., *The Limits of Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

gives rise to the many, and frequently contradictory, interpretations of and conjectures about OT narrative."<sup>72</sup> He concludes that to attempt to pin down a single meaning of the text is misguided and argues that most exegetical issues are undecidable: "The reading encounters ambiguity, equivocation, opposed meanings and cannot decide for or establish one or the other; the reading cannot stop, it cannot control or limit the text."<sup>73</sup>

In his analysis of the David and Goliath story, for example, Miscall concentrates on both the concrete details of the text as well as the gaps, for instance, information not given in the text about a character's motivation. By such an analysis of the text of 1 Samuel 17, Miscall claims that

David's character is undecidable. The text permits us to regard David as a pious and innocent young shepherd going to battle the Philistine because of the latter's defiance of the Lord and as a cunning and ambitious young warrior who is aware of the effects that his defeat of Goliath will have on the assembled army.<sup>74</sup>

In the postscript Miscall explicitly connects his readings with a deconstructive approach to the text. He points out instances he finds of aporia, of inherent contradictions in the text. He argues that the type of ambiguity he thus demonstrates is the result of the nature of literary communication (the slippage of signifier and signified) and that the Bible, like other works of literature, always deconstructs itself.

<sup>72</sup>P. D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 1.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 73.

# Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

Biblical scholarship has until recently paid little attention to the field of literary criticism. Conservative exegetes have, not without reason, feared that the use of literary criticism might lead to a downplaying or even the denial of the historical worth of Scripture. Indeed, there are dangers in emphasizing the literary aspects of the Bible at the expense of its historical content. But it is equally hazardous to minimize or ignore the Bible's literary nature. "The Bible as literature or history is a false dichotomy. It is both and much more."

The author's stated purpose in this book is "to familiarize the reader with the literary nature of the Bible and to acquaint him or her with the research that is being carried out on the Bible by literary scholars." Dr. Longman's work blends an intelligent commitment to the authority of the Bible with an impressive expertise in contemporary literary theories.

But the reader will find more than just a survey of the theory behind the literary approach. He will also find a practical introduction to the literary analysis of prose and poetic passages, complete with examples of both.

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